

INTRODUCTION

LOOK AT YOU VS. LOOK AT ME

THE PROGRAM director of a local radio station in Vancouver called me into his office for a meeting.

At the age of 22, I was a runner-up in a contest to be the “Sticker Spotter” to surprise and delight listeners around town who sported a station sticker on their bumper. Even though I didn’t win, the station gave me a chance to work in promotions. On the one hand, I was thrilled to join the team, because I wanted to get my foot in the media door and ultimately learn how to become an on-air presenter. Mom and Dad, on the other hand, who have always been supportive, were questioning my sanity: defecting from a safe career path in the financial world? Yikes.

This director was an intimidating figure. He was the big boss—everybody scrambled to look busy when he walked into the room. In every interaction, he would briefly acknowledge me with a head nod then just look at me and listen as if he could read my mind. I’m pretty sure he could tell I was terrified. I was so far out of my element; I wasn’t even on the same periodic table.

When he called me into his office for an impromptu meeting, I honestly thought I was being let go. That's a common reality in the volatile media business. Instead, he started talking about life and connection.

"Riaz," he said, "if you want to get ahead in this business, the key is understanding the difference between talking to people and talking at them." He championed the notion of staying in the moment in conversations. "Make it about them," he said. "And always remember, 'Look at you' needs to be greater than 'look at me.'" He told me that the efforts we make to learn about people and actively listen to their struggles by feeling their words, not fixing them, are what create relationships that fuel success.

He didn't let me go that day. It turned out he saw some potential in me, and he'd pulled me aside just to give me that advice. He said he believed in me. I was relieved—and grateful that he'd taken the time to talk to me. That conversation taught me the value of giving more than you take.

A year later, I applied for an on-air gig on the station's morning radio show. I was a finalist, but I didn't get the gig. Soon after that, I gave my notice. I felt like I'd done what I could do at the station.

When I told that director, his response was, "Good. Go be on TV. That's where you need to be." He didn't want to get in the way of what he believed I could do. He didn't just talk the talk about listening and making every conversation about the other person. He practiced that, and he proved it in that moment. Instead of focusing on what my departure meant for him and the station, he stayed in the moment with me and focused on my journey.

Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but not getting that radio job was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me in my career. And the perspective that director

shared with me in our first impromptu meeting ultimately helped me build a career as a broadcaster and interviewer. That one conversation planted a seed for every conversation I would ever have to mean more.

“Talk to them, not at them” is a gift I’ve always carried forward. And those words only became more valuable in a time when people began searching for a heightened sense of human connection.

A year that changed everything— except who we are

As I write these words, it’s the mid-point of 2020. It’s been a disruptive year that will go down in history for a pandemic that made us rethink everything. Words like “quarantine,” “new normal,” and “social distancing” became part of our everyday vernacular. Systems that were broken were exposed. Unemployment soared. Remote work was a new reality. People protested for racial justice. Unlearning became a top priority. All of this happened while we figured out how to exist in isolation, deprived of our regular rituals of social contact. And we were reminded that human connection isn’t an option, it’s a necessity.

According to Sebastian Junger, in his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, “The beauty and the tragedy of the modern world is that it eliminates many situations that require people to demonstrate commitment to the collective good.”¹ We don’t have to work together to raise a barn or bring in the harvest. The design of modern life emphasizes individual convenience, not solidarity.

That’s why disaster can often bring us together and create a renewed sense of community. History teaches us that

people don't descend into anarchy when disaster strikes. They pull together. They help one another.

But it shouldn't take a disaster to bring us together. As human beings, we urgently need connection all the time, on good days and bad. As many of us discovered during the lockdowns brought on by the pandemic, isolation can literally make us sick. It can shorten our lives.

Why are our relationships so important?

The quality of our relationships is vital for our health, well-being, and, as we learned in 2020, our survival. Healthy relationships help us live longer and manage stress and anxiety. According to a survey by the National Bureau of Economic Research, doubling our group of friends has the same positive impact on our well-being as a 50% increase in income.² Family, friends, and positive business relationships all help contribute to a healthier life. Without meaningful human connection, our mental health can be significantly impacted.

If you're wondering about the quality of connections in your own life, it is never too late to focus on cultivating extraordinary relationships. Why make this a priority now?

“We rise to the influence of the company we keep.”

This is one of the greatest lessons I have learned from asking questions for a living as a broadcast television host. Over the past two decades I have had the chance to interview thousands of successful leaders, athletes, celebrities, and difference makers while working for brands such as Citytv's *Breakfast Television Vancouver*, MTV Canada, the Toronto International Film Festival, and TEDxVancouver.

For years, I have documented the countless ways our conversations can help build meaningful connections. How we

listen. How we react. The unique questions we can ask to learn what isn't being said. How we can speak up when we fear saying the wrong thing. Most importantly, how we can productively disagree in a polarized climate. Relationships are the foundation for productive conversation.

We all struggle to break through the noise and chaos of our always-on, overscheduled lives and forge genuine connections, whether personal or professional. This book is an essential read for sales professionals who need to quickly connect with customers, leaders who need to strengthen their relationships with direct reports in order to deliver results, entrepreneurs who need to build strong networks of supporters to bring their ideas to life, and professionals in any field who need to learn how to network better. But you will also encounter many lessons you can use in your personal life, to connect on a deeper level with friends, family members, partners, and more.

What to expect from this book

Every Conversation Counts tackles a central question of modern life: why are we so connected, and yet so alone? It digs deep into how and why millions of people find themselves more isolated than ever despite the many technologies that are supposed to make us constantly connected. It also examines how the danger of isolation was brought into sharp relief by the coronavirus pandemic. In the following chapters, you will discover the enormous human cost of this pandemic of loneliness. And you'll learn some practical strategies for building stronger connections, both in your personal life and at work.

Drawing from my 17 years of on-camera experience as a broadcaster and interviewer, I will share a simple five-part

framework for building extraordinary relationships in our increasingly disconnected world. By combating distractions, getting past awkward small talk, putting aside the pretense of perfection, and having difficult conversations, you will be able to spark real, authentic conversations. It's funny; the ideas may feel familiar, yet you will soon realize how easy it is to forget these basic habits for human connection. The chapters ahead will help you overcome these barriers and give you the skills you need to cultivate trust and loyalty.

We'll begin this conversation in Part One, with an exploration of the unplanned experiment in isolation that the coronavirus lockdowns created. We'll talk about the toll that quarantine took, and about how people responded to isolation by reaching out and finding creative ways to connect. We'll also explore the pandemic of loneliness that was already spreading even before we were all forced to isolate in our homes.

In Part Two, you will learn the five habits that will help you overcome loneliness and build extraordinary relationships. In "Listen without Distraction," we'll discuss how *leading with listening* can help you connect in our always-on, always-distracted world. In "Make Your Small Talk Bigger," we'll discuss how to get past surface-level pleasantries when meeting someone new, by *igniting your curiosity*. In "Put Aside Your Perfect Persona," we'll explore how *removing your mask* and letting yourself be vulnerable can promote deeper connection. In "Be Assertively Empathetic," you'll learn how *assertive empathy* can help you defuse conflicts. And in "Make People Feel Famous," we'll discuss how you can *make people feel famous* through the power of appreciation.

Since we all need to thrive in remote settings, Part Three explores connection in a virtual world. We'll discuss the limitations of digital communication and the risks of remote

work, and I'll share some tips for connecting at a distance. The final chapter looks ahead to the future of human connection and asks the question: post-pandemic, what will change about the ways we live, work, and connect?

We all crave connection. We evolved to be social animals. We were never meant to live alone or communicate only in “likes” and retweets. This book explains why so many aspects of our modern lives feel so shallow and unsatisfying—and points a way forward to a better future in which we all express genuine curiosity about the people in our lives, listen with our whole hearts, show up as our authentic selves, and make every conversation count.